Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

Asbury Dickins (1836-1861)

The Office of the Secretary experienced its most dramatic growth during the seventy-two years between 1789 and the start of the Civil War. From a three-person staff working out of a cramped second-floor New York City office, to a cadre of experienced legislative professionals based in the ornate Capitol suite today occupied by the Democratic leader, the Office reflected the Senate's tremendous institutional development during its first three-quarters of a century.

Two individuals profoundly guided the Office's growth. The first Secretary of the Senate, Samuel Otis, established its general administrative, legislative, and financial roles. In an era when half the senators failed to serve out a full six-year term, Otis provided badly needed institutional continuity throughout his twenty-five years on the job. While Otis founded the office, Secretary Asbury Dickins stabilized it. Without his firm and competent hand over a tenure nearly as long as Otis', the office might have followed an entirely different course in the years after his 1861 retirement.

The two Secretaries who bridged the twenty-two years between the end of Otis' term and the start of Dickins' -- Charles Cutts and Walter Lowrie -- had previously been senators. They turned out to be the last former senators to hold this position. The available record suggests that neither added much to the office's development. By the time Cutts had served nearly a decade, the Senate took steps to get rid of him. In a move demonstrating concern over his casual financial management practices, the Senate approved legislation requiring the Secretary to publish a detailed annual report of expenditures. In a second action, the Senate transferred to the Vice President the Secretary's traditional responsibility for preparing the *Senate Journal*. At a time when Senate officers held their posts indefinitely, the Senate mandated that its officers be elected every two years. At the first such election, Cutts lost his job to Walter Lowrie. As a token of confidence in its new officer, the Senate restored the Secretary's responsibilities for keeping the journal. Lowrie served eleven years and retired in 1836.

Asbury Dickins, a North Carolina Democrat, for many years had wanted to become the Senate's Secretary. He had sought the job unsuccessfully in 1825, but with Lowrie's departure, he narrowly won the position. Born in Scotland fifty-six years earlier, Dickins had worked as a publisher, a bookseller, and for the past twenty years as chief clerk in the Treasury and then the State Department.

When Dickins took over the position, the Secretary's Office consisted of six clerks and one messenger. Responding to complaints about staff disorganization and blurred responsibilities, Dickins prepared a manual that carefully described each person's duties. Sensitive to senators' complaints that clerks were not always available when needed, he

instructed his staff that "the hours of business will be from 9 o'clock to 3 and until such later hour as the Senate may remain in session; and it will be expected of the gentlemen in the Office to be ready at all times ... and that the business of each day will be dispatched during the day, so as to prevent accumulation and delay."

Dickins' quarter-century as Secretary coincided neatly with the Senate's so-called "Golden Age" –– a period of national political turmoil that propelled the Senate to the front rank of America's political institutions. In its increasingly jammed chamber, the "Great Triumvirate" of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun held forth on the divisive issues of territorial expansion. During Dickins' tenure, sixteen additional senators from eight new states took their places in that chamber, forcing an 1850 decision to construct "extensions" to the Senate and House wings. We can only assume that preparations for the Senate's new chamber, committee rooms, and staff offices weighed heavily on Secretary Dickins through the remainder of the 1850s.

Within the Secretary's Office, the growth in the Senate's membership and national stature brought additional staff and more detailed job descriptions. The executive clerk handed over responsibility to a newly appointed account clerk for keeping daily pay and mileage reimbursement records. Messengers, who were previously interchangeable, received more carefully spelled out assignments that foreshadowed the Office's twentieth-century development. The first messenger provided senators with stationery supplies; the second delivered bills, documents, newspapers, and janitorial services; and the third –- sharing duties with a page -- swept, built fires, and actually carried messages.

As the Secretary's Office became more "professionalized," the Secretary gained legal authority to select his own staff. To protect employees from arbitrary dismissal, the Senate required the Secretary to submit a written justification of all terminations to the Vice President for approval. Surviving evidence is not sufficient to tell us how well these protections actually worked.

Asbury Dickins helped direct the Senate's institutional activities at a time of vast political growth and turmoil. That he survived several changes in party control attests to the bipartisan respect he earned for his office. On July 15, 1861, with hostile armies maneuvering to seize Washington, the eighty-year-old Secretary reluctantly retired and died soon thereafter. Since that time, no successor has witnessed as much institutional change or come within reach of his longevity record.